



United States Mission to the OSCE

OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism Intervention for Session 4

As prepared for delivery by Ambassador Stephan M. Minikes,
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It is an honor to speak at this conference and, in particular, at this plenary session on the Role of the Media in Conveying and Countering Prejudice. I would like to thank our moderator and introducers, including the head of the U.S. Delegation Mayor Koch, for their insightful remarks.

Addressing the issue of anti-Semitism in the media is critical because, with modern media technologies like satellite television and the internet, bias and prejudice can travel faster and reach more people than ever before in history. Obvious examples are the recent showing of a 41-part series based on the malicious Protocols of the Elders of Zion, or the proliferation of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories on Internet websites. In short, the purveyors of hate have embraced these new technologies to spread their venomous message. For this reason I congratulate France and the OSCE for organizing this June in Paris a forward-looking event on the relationship between racist, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic propaganda on the Internet and hate crimes.

Dealing with the problem of anti-Semitism in the media is, however, a delicate issue. Rather than looking at potentially dangerous solutions involving state control or censorship, we should put our confidence in a free and flourishing media scene in which ideas are freely raised, challenged, and debated. Such a media provides a platform for debunking myths and lies, and thus, countering prejudice. Such a media can also, on its own, investigate and expose a government's failure to address anti-Semitism and other forms of prejudice.

A key element in minimizing anti-Semitism in the media without heavy-handed state interference is journalist training. Journalists trained according to a code of ethics that places highest priority on objectivity and critical assessment of information will be less likely to lapse into reporting anti-Semitic stereotypes and other prejudices. In other words, the media too has responsibility to develop its own standards and engage in critical evaluation of its own work.

Developing and maintaining a culture of responsible journalism is not only an issue for established media outlets, but also those serving new minority populations in Western Europe and North America. Various institutions have reported on the propagation of anti-Semitic stereotypes in these media. Governments and NGOs that provide journalist training programs should give strong consideration to reaching out particularly to journalists from such media outlets.

As I mentioned earlier, given the imperative of protecting free speech, we must embrace the media as a tool to promote tolerance, rather than seek to control or regulate it. Education and the media are the two tools we have to win hearts and minds in the war against hate. Public officials, NGOs, and, where appropriate, international organizations should use every opportunity available to denounce through the media manifestations of anti-Semitism and to educate the media about anti-Semitism. We cannot be passive, but must seek out our journalist colleagues to make sure our message is heard and the information they need is available. For example, passage of a new law or the launch of a new initiative to fight anti-Semitism will have little impact on public consciousness unless accompanied by an appropriate media campaign.

If we are to talk frankly about the role of the media in conveying and countering prejudice, we must also address the link between coverage of events in the Middle East, discussion of those developments in the media and manifestations of anti-Semitism in the OSCE region. It is worrisome that, in the EUMC's publication entitled "Perceptions of Anti-Semitism in the EU" almost all of the 35 Jewish leaders interviewed expressed concern about the role of the media in portraying Jews or the Middle East conflict.

For example, those interviewed pointed to several examples of how media in some countries portrays Jews and Israelis interchangeably.

Why is this issue so relevant to our conference today? It is because coverage of the Middle East can lead not only to prejudice, but also to violence. The EUMC has reported that, in at least several European countries, surges in anti-Semitic incidents have coincided with increased tensions between Israel and Palestinians since 2000. We must never forget that political developments in the Middle East never justify violence or any other manifestation of intolerance against Jews.

Let me stress that it is absolutely legitimate to disagree with and criticize the policies and actions of any state, including Israel. However, we must also acknowledge that there is a line at which criticism can cross over into anti-Semitism. We applaud the fact that European Union leaders have not shied away from this sensitive issue. Speaking on February 12, 2004, EU Commission President Romano Prodi stated: "Equally, where criticism is leveled at specific policies of the Israeli Government, I like to think this is a normal expression of democratic dissent . . . But I am aware, and I cannot deny, that some criticism of Israel is inspired by what amounts to anti-Semitic incidents and prejudice. This must be recognized for what it is and properly addressed."

It is extraordinarily difficult to draw the line between criticism of Israel and anti-Semitic attacks. How can we and our journalistic colleagues judge when criticism of Israel may be veering in the direction of anti-Semitism. Attacks on Israel that denigrate all Jews or that reflect or promote anti-Jewish stereotypes are anti-Semitic. Another measurement that we can use to help evaluate whether criticism of Israel or any state is motivated by bias more than genuine dissent is when a state is judged by double-standards. If a media outlet disseminates sustained, one-sided attacks on Israel or another state, while ignoring the other side of the story, this raises questions about the motivations and intent of the producers.

In closing, Mr. Moderator, let me reiterate that freedom of the media is a touchstone principle for my Government. Within the framework of protecting and promoting a free and vibrant media, we must make partners of our journalistic colleagues in the fight against anti-Semitism. We must find creative ways to keep anti-Semitism from being conveyed in the media and to counter it when it raises its ugly head. We cannot cede the immense power of modern media to those who would use it to divide us.

Thank you.